

Sermon: Getting Back on Solid Ground
A reflection on Matthew 14: 22-33 by Stephanie L. Hare
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Walking on water: such a familiar phrase, that it's become a cliché in our culture, hasn't it? An expression for someone who has a particularly high social status, as in: "that person is so popular, people think they walk on water."

But this is a very cool story with so much more value than a clichéd expression. A version of this amazing occurrence appears in three out of the four Gospels. The writers of the books of Mark, Matthew, and John all knew this story and decided that this was one that needed to be told again and again.

If you're an armchair Bible nerd like me, it's a fun exercise to read a story that's recorded in more than one Gospel to check out which details each storyteller emphasizes. It's interesting to wonder about what each author hopes their listeners will take away from the story.

We have been exploring the book of Matthew this summer in our Gospel readings. And this telling of Jesus walking on the water includes a plot detail that gives the story a different angle than the others. That detail is our friend Peter. While Mark and John don't give Peter any individual airtime at all, the book of Matthew gives Peter a very crucial role in the series of events.

In our passage, Jesus' disciples are out on a boat that is getting battered by wind and waves and they've been out there for most of a night. It must have been incredibly dark out there on the water. I imagine it was impossible to keep a candle or oil lamp lit with all that wind. And if there were storm clouds overhead, there wouldn't have been any moonlight to see by.

So when Jesus walks out to them on the water, it's not hard to understand that the scared, sleep deprived folks on the boat initially thought they were seeing a ghost as he approached the vessel. Jesus sees and hears his friends panicking and reassures them of who he is and that they are going to be ok. The sea is calmed and everyone is, indeed, ok.

This is where the three versions of the story we have available to us agree: Disciples on boat, long night, big waves, Jesus walks on water, Disciples freak out, Jesus assures them that he is not a ghost but their friend and teacher.

But here comes Matthew's plot twist: Peter now does something wild. Jesus is out there standing on the water, with waves swirling around him, amazingly not being overtaken by them, and Peter says, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." And Jesus says, "Come." So Peter gets out of the boat and proceeds toward Jesus.

Isn't it fascinating that Peter decided to try something so big, so daring, and potentially dangerous at that exact moment? As far as we know, none of the other Disciples even give this a thought.

But when Peter feels the strong wind, he gets really scared and as he is beginning to sink, he cries out, "Lord, save me!" Jesus responds immediately, reaching out his hand and catching Peter.

Then Jesus says these oft quoted words: "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" The two friends get into the boat, and it is then that the winds cease.

There are lots of interpreters of this story that get really down on Peter here. Countless times, this moment has been painted as a cautionary tale— the lesson being, that Peter losing focus on Jesus for even a moment brought about the potential for a terrible tragedy and his almost certain personal demise. And that if he just hadn't lost his focus – and we extrapolate – if only his faith was stronger – this wouldn't have happened. He wouldn't have begun to sink and he could have carried on walking right on the water just like Jesus. From this perspective, in this moment, Peter is seen as a weakling and a failure.

Well, ok. That's one way to look at this story. But I think that's not the only potential lesson to be learned here.

As I was reading this story for the fourth or fifth time, I tried to put myself in Peter's shoes – or more likely, sandals. I wondered what it must have felt like for him to try to do something so brave, only to find himself suddenly overwhelmed and scared for his life.

I was taken back for a moment to my first semester in college when I had a work-study job on the tech staff of the Dance and Theater department. It was a few weeks before the end of the semester and time to get ready for the typical end of the semester performances – the theatrical production, the dance concert – which meant there was lots of work to be done with the lighting equipment in our little black box theater. This was my first opportunity to get up on the very tall ladders and move lights around with my upper class coworkers.

The more experienced students made it look easy: climb up the big A-frame ladder, wrench in hand, undo the clamp holding the lighting unit to the pipe along the ceiling of the stage, scooch it over a few inches and tighten the clamp back up, or take the whole thing completely off the pipe, climb back down the ladder – with this bulky unit in hand – move the ladder to a different part of the stage, scramble back up and attach the light to the pipe grid – at this point using both hands over one's head to hang, plug in, and refocus the light, and using only one's internal sense of balance to steady oneself on the ladder. Easy, right?

Well, I thought it was going to be. So on that day with our faculty Tech Director showing us on the lighting plot where every light was supposed to go, and with the other student staff scurrying about

moving lighting equipment, I grabbed a wrench and climbed the big ladder to take down one of the lights that was currently hanging over centerstage right.

And it was on that day, at the top of that ladder, that I found out that I had a debilitating fear of heights. I had gotten up the ladder, managed to use my wrench to undo the clamp, slide the clamp off the pipe, but now I was stuck. I couldn't move. At all. I was up there, hands full, in complete shutdown. I suddenly felt like I was floating in midair with no connection to the floor, any other part of the room, or any part of planet Earth for that matter. I was certain that if I moved a single tendon, I was going to fly off that ladder and I was going to end up on the floor far, far below, not in very good shape. My brain could no longer make any rational decisions.

At some point in what seemed like an eternity of me being up in the air, our Tech Director, Joe, looked up from the floor of the stage and said, "hey, you ok up there?" One of the other students saw me and I think said something like, "Ooo, Stephanie doesn't look so good".

As deftly as a squirrel running up a tree, Joe scooted up the other side of the ladder, carefully took the lighting unit out of my hands, looked me square in the eye and said very firmly, "climb. down." So I slowly climbed back down and plopped down on the floor of the stage.

After a few moments to feel the floor underneath me and catch my breath, Joe sent me off to the quiet of the lighting booth to sort equipment, a task I could do with both my feet firmly on solid ground, but also to give me solitude in which to shake off the stress hormones were still racing around in my system from my panic attack.

So as I was re-reading our Gospel passage, I was thinking about how if I had that strong a psychological and physiological reaction to standing on a ladder in my college theater, about how much more fraught with danger Peter's situation was and how much more anxiety he must have been experiencing.

Because we should also remember as we're reading this story, that both Jesus and his Disciples had already been through a very rough couple of days before this terrorizing boat ride even started.

Our passage today picks up right where our reading from last week left off: Jesus, as we remember Scott telling us last week, had been told about the murder of John the Baptist while John was imprisoned by government authorities who were threatened by his ministry. Jesus was seeking out a quiet place to pray, and to mourn the loss of his cousin and partner in ministry when the crowds found him, seeking out his comfort, council, and wisdom. Jesus, with the assistance of his Disciples, feeds a crowd of thousands of people both in body and in spirit.

So at this point, Jesus really needs his alone time. He sends the Disciples out on the boat and disperses the crowd.

I can't imagine how the Disciples must have been feeling through this very long night on this boat that followed what must have been several very long days. The tumult of the waves battering the sides of the boat could also serve here as a metaphor for the internal emotional churning and confusion that they may have been experiencing at this time.

When we get to the moment that Jesus comes to rescue his friends and Peter asks to be called on to the water to walk with Jesus, how could Peter not still be keenly aware of the wind whipping around them on the sea? The fact that he got out of the boat and walked as far as he did is actually pretty amazing considering everything going on around and within him.

But here's another really remarkable thing: when Peter realizes that he's no longer above the water, but now sinking into it, he has the presence of mind to call out to Jesus. Yes, he is terrified, and rightfully so. But he doesn't completely freeze up, nor does he try to turn around, changing course to attempt to swim back to the boat which must have seemed like the only solid and reliable object to grab on to at that moment.

No, he asks for help from the one he knows can help him. That's huge. Very often when we're in crisis, asking for help, even knowing how or who to ask, is the hardest thing to do. When I was stuck up at the top of my ladder back there in the college theater, I couldn't even utter the word "help".

And Jesus responds with exactly what Peter needs: a solid firm grip of his hand. The physical touch that is going to help Peter reconnect his mind and his body, making him feel secure, bringing him out of his panic.

Jesus didn't need to touch Peter to rescue him; I mean, he's Jesus – he probably could have waved his pinky finger or just called Peter's name to make him rise up out of the waves.

Afterall, Jesus himself was still above the water – he didn't have the leverage that someone standing on the shoreline or on a rock would have to physically pull someone else up. But Jesus knows that in addition to getting his head above water, the reassurance from Jesus' strong grip is also what Peter needed to know that he was truly going to survive.

Looking at Peter's actions in this story with more attention to the context and detail surrounding his situation allows me to see him through more compassionate eyes than I've seen him before.

It also changes the tone in which I hear Jesus say, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Now, instead of a judgmental admonishment for a lack of an absolute, iron-clad, unquestioning belief, I hear Jesus' caring heart acknowledging **not** that Peter's faith is weak, but that it is the faith of a human in crisis, doing the best that he can.

And when Jesus asks, "why did you doubt?" I hear him asking it the way that we might ask someone we care about, "tell me why you are scared" when they have been in a frightening situation. I imagine

Jesus helping Peter to process his near death experience; so that he can heal and eventually move on to the greater work that lies in store for him down the road.

One of the hard things for those of us who have grown up hearing this story from the point of view that Peter's faith in Jesus wavered and that was a point of weakness and failure, is that we can easily slip into the mode of internalizing judgement and shame on ourselves when we feel like we have failed at something that was really beyond our control. When something big and novel, or even a small daily activity, doesn't go to plan, it's really easy to blame ourselves or try unfairly to place blame on others for things going sideways – for life not being absolutely perfect all the time.

Don't get me wrong, there are times that we mess up. When we act out in greed or malice, that is something we need to repent for. And yeah, there are also situations in which we could have tried harder or planned ahead better or been more considerate of other people's needs. Those things are on us.

But there are also all the things in life that are just bigger than we are. Sometimes we're going to attempt something that's outside our skill set, something we're not ready to do. Sometimes there's a metaphorical storm abrewin' that gets in our way. Or a system failure that we didn't know about. And whatever we want to do is just not going to work out the way we want.

The act of faith, in my view, is what we do next. How do we ask for help; how do we grow; how do we learn; how do we rest; how do we ask for forgiveness – how do we forgive ourselves; and how do we help others heal and grow as well, making sure no one gets left behind.

To have faith is to choose to be active in a daily practice that's very rarely straightforward; it's not a character attribute or an object that you can possess or lose.

Just like God doesn't leave Jesus in a tomb, and Jesus doesn't leave Peter in the sea, as the hands and feet of Christ, we are called to look out for and offer a strong grip to those around us who are struggling, whether they are up on a ladder, down in the water, or anywhere in between.

And in our own moments of struggle, may we have the presence of mind to call out for help and be assured that our help and a return to solid ground are just as close as we need them to be.

May it be so. In the name of Jesus Christ, our companion, teacher, and savior, Amen.